



UWS Academic Portal

Book review

Maclean, Chloe

Published in:
Scottish Affairs

Published: 21/02/2020

Document Version
Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication on the UWS Academic Portal](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Maclean, C. (2020). Book review: Poverty Safari: understanding the anger of Britain's underclass. *Scottish Affairs*, 29(1), 122-126. <https://www.eupublishing.com/doi/abs/10.3366/scot.2020.0310>

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the UWS Academic Portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact pure@uws.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Edinburgh University Press in Scottish Affairs. The Version of Record is available online at:

<https://www.euppublishing.com/doi/full/10.3366/scot.2020.0310>

Darren McGarvey, *Poverty Safari: Understanding the Anger of Britain's Underclass*, Edinburgh: Luath Press, 2017, 223pp, £7.99, ISBN: 987-1-912147-03-8.

Written in the wake of both the Scottish independence referendum and Britain's EU membership referendum, Darren 'Loki' McGarvey's Orwell prize winning *Poverty Safari: Understanding the Anger of Britain's Underclass* has been piped as an 'essential read' for those seeking to understand the political motivations and frustrations of those living in poverty in contemporary Britain. McGarvey positions *Poverty Safari* as a commentary that addresses the lack of attention paid to, and engaged understanding of, the lives and desires of those in poverty:

'most people, despite their noble intensions, were just passing though on a short lived expedition. A safari of sorts where the indigenous population is surveyed from a safe distance for a time, before the window on the community closes and everyone gradually forgets about them... My intention has been for poverty safari to resonate with people who feel misunderstood and unheard, that this book might be some sort of forum, giving voice to their feelings and concerns' p11.

McGarvey's own stated intention, and the acclaim that *Poverty Safari* has received as a guide for understanding the frustrations of those living in poverty, does not do justice to the breadth of contributions of the book. Whilst his stated intention is for *Poverty Safari* to have resonance with those living in poverty, the book is implicitly directed towards a further two key audiences - the middle classes and the political left - providing a thorough critique of the role these two groupings play in the maintenance of poverty. Four key themes structure this critique: Overlooking working class lives; class and political tribalism; the poverty industry; and the political left's disengagement with individual responsibility.

Within the first fourteen of thirty two chapters McGarvey presents anecdotes of his childhood and youth in the housing scheme of Pollock in Glasgow. Within these anecdotes McGarvey maps out the embodied consequences of poverty and the trauma it often entails on individuals ways of viewing the world, themselves, and engaging with the world. the emotions of shame, resentment, and anger that are central to the experience. From these accounts the logics behind apparently self-harming acts such as gathering debt, remaining in toxic relationships, and engaging in substance abuse are revealed. In doing so, Loki's account makes rich contributions to understandings of poverty that appear to speak to, and add to, the work of Sociologists such as Bev Skeggs and Imogen Tyler who highlight the inter-related emotional and bodily elements of working class life.

Whilst these stories may have some familiarity to people like myself who grew up in, or live in, schemes across Scotland, it appears that these stories have another function: that of illuminating the experiences and logics of living in poverty to a middle class audience. And I can see why this is an important thing to do – it brings attention to the elements of working class life that, as McGarvey highlights in his discussion of the polarised nature of classed lives in Britain, otherwise the middle class would not know about. Given the tribalism of class identity that McGarvey critiques as problematic, the sharing of knowledge and experience to the other is perhaps a necessary bridge for reducing stigmas and stereotypes. And ultimately, translating these experiences to the middle class is important because those who hold power positions in society are the middle and upper classes. None-the-less when reading these chapters, whilst highly detailed and well written, I felt an overarching discomfort that *Poverty Safari* could become another example of writing about working class lives that is not actually *for* the working classes themselves. Such writing can serve a function, as I have suggested, but the frequency with which the telling of working class experience is shaped for middle class audiences in ways that predominantly do not challenge them, rather than for ourselves, is disheartening.

However, at chapter 15 my discomfort was alleviated as McGarvey ‘takes control of the analysis’ of poverty in Britain, and no longer does the tone of *Poverty Safari* passively accommodate an onlooking middle class audience. As the book changes from story to analysis McGarvey critiques the exploitation of those who have suffered poverty’s traumatic stories. He draws on his own experience to highlight the compulsion to ‘vomit’ up traumatic events as a way of gaining control over them, noting the enthusiasm of media outlets to praise such disclosures with air time. However, the narration of experiences of poverty comes with caveats:

‘I was learning that even the harshest childhood experience wouldn’t get you a free pass to cast a critical eye on the structures around you’ 123.

In order to have his critical voice heard, McGarvey discusses using the stories of his childhood as a ‘trojan horse’ to gain an audience, a capital that the middle class desire, before unleashing his analysis of those very experiences. Perhaps the story telling at the beginning of *Poverty Safari* acts in part as the very ‘trojan horse’ McGarvey discusses deploying in other media contexts to gain the attention of a middle class audience.

Alongside the media, McGarvey critiques the third sector organisations set up to remedy poverty as exploitative of those in poverty. He unpicks a central internal contradiction embedded within this sector: The eradication of poverty eradicates the industry. As such there is vested interest in what he labels the 'poverty industry' for poverty to persist. The self-interest of the industry is further illuminated by their insistence of taking charge of the empowerment of those in poverty in manners that fit the agenda's of those funding the sector, rather facilitating bottom-up empowerment of those they are placed to support. McGarvey positions the expansion of the poverty industry on the backdrop of ever depleting community centres. What is eradicated in the transition from community centres to third sector activities, McGarvey suggests, is a sense of communal ownership of space and direction. He concludes that a well intentioned left-leaning liberal class lead the poverty industry that fail because they only have a theoretical understanding of what poverty is like whilst insisting on having ownership of its solution.

In fitting with his anti-tribalistic approach to politics, McGarvey dedicates a large proportion of his analysis of poverty to critiquing the Scottish left. Indeed, Loki suggests the left wing have fallen into the tribalistic pattern in politics to position the blame for social issues on political opponents, without reflecting on their own role in such issues. Whilst such a position eradicates the nuances and complexity of social issues such as poverty, McGarvey suggests that more crucially for the left, tribalism removes the focus of the left's attention from supporting the needs of the working classes to self-image preservation. As such, whilst the Scottish left is evidently McGarvey's political home, he uses *Poverty Safari* to challenge the left's current political practices.

McGarvey also maps this pattern onto the actions of the Scottish left. McGarvey reminisces nostalgically of the community resistance to the building of the M74 through Pollock and the anti-poll tax movements as movements that were born from, engaged, and were steered by the working classes. Within this context the working classes expressed their beliefs and work towards creating the solutions to the problems on their doorstep. Yet McGarvey suggests the contemporary mainstream political left have lost the trust of communities as they are no longer seen to be primarily invested in the people or embedded in the community, but rather focus on their own political agendas.

Perhaps McGarvey's most controversial claim in *Poverty Safari*, and his most critical comment on the Scottish left, is his call for greater focus on the role of personal responsibility in addressing poverty, both at a party political and personal level:

‘Responsibility for poverty and its attendant challenges is almost always externalised; ascribed to an unseen force or structure, a system or some vaguely defined elite. These things are undoubtedly constituent parts of the problem, but our analysis rarely acknowledges the complexity of poverty as it is experienced by human being, day-to-day’ P129.

In his call for the left to engage with personal responsibility, McGarvey engages with a common dualism discussed in sociology: that of structure and agency. His critique of the left suggests that the left overlook the agency of those in poverty. As a sociologist, this critique is uncomfortable to hear as the language of personal responsibility is operationalised by neoliberalism and right wing politics to shame, stigmatise, and shortchange those in poverty.

‘you are no use to any family, community, cause or movement unless you are first able to manage, maintain and operate the machinery of your own life. These are the means of production that one must seize before meaningful change can occur.’ P220

Poverty Safari is about much more than telling tales of daily life in the schemes. Through critical analytic discussion of the experience of poverty, McGarvey provides a call for change in political conduct, to a (feminist) politics grounded in honesty, open discussion, collaboration, collectives and (self) respect. *Poverty Safari*’s brilliance is partially because such working/underclass knowledge has not previously been listened to. Its popularity may also be that there are many who, like Loki, feel let down by the political left in Scotland and Britain, but still believe in left wing policies and ideals. This book perhaps resonates with their own criticisms of the left and their desires for changes in the lefts political approach.